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ABSTRACT

A review of 48 follow-up surveys of two-year college vocational education graduates conducted at the institutional and state levels reveals some common findings regarding the graduates' employment experiences. Most survey respondents (70% to 80%) reported that they were employed full-time; 66% to 96% indicated that their jobs were in some way related to their programs of study at college; and most indicated satisfaction with the technical knowledge or job skills they gained at college, while expressing less satisfaction with the colleges' helpfulness in providing knowledge about career opportunities or in preparing them for career advances. In spite of the commonality of these findings, survey limitations and methodological weaknesses make it difficult to assess the extent to which graduates' career outcomes can be attributed to their vocational studies. Among these weaknesses are the fact that most studies were conducted on a "one-shot" basis; many studies were conducted too soon after graduation to provide a long-term view of students' career lives; many surveys obtained low response rates; and many suffered from a lack of control groups against which to assess graduates' employment experiences. To improve vocational follow-up studies several steps could be taken, including: (1) reduce the size of the survey instrument to improve response rates; (2) solicit information on graduates' educational goals and prior employment experiences; (3) gather longitudinal data to trace career develpment patterns; and (4) base studies on well-chosen samples as an alternative to surveying all program graduates. (EJV)

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ASSESSING THE EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE VOCATIONAL PROGRAM GRADUATES

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The growing number of associate degrees awarded in occupational curricula has been well-documented. During 1981-82, 276,493 such degrees were awarded nationwide representing a 52 percent increase over the number (181,653) conferred during 1973-74. In contrast, the number of associate degrees awarded in the liberal arts and sciences during 1981-82 stood at only 158,000 -- a decrease of 4.5 percent over the 1973-74 figure of 165,520 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1981; ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges, 1985).

But less is known about what happens to vocational program graduates after they receive the associate degree. Do these graduates find employment in fields for which they are trained? Do associate degree recipients experience more successful career lives than those with no credential beyond the high school diploma? National data on the employment experiences of vocational program graduates are not regularly collected, and most of what we know stems from graduate follow-up studies conducted at the institutional and state levels.

This ERIC Digest draws from a recent review of such follow-up studies (Palmer, 1985) to summarize (1) common findings regarding graduate employment experiences, (2) methodological weaknesses in the studies that limit our knowledge of graduates' employment success, and (3) suggestions for improving the base of available data on vocational program graduates.

What are the Common Findings of Graduate Follow-Up Studies?

In his analysis, Palmer (1985) reviewed 48 follow-up surveys conducted at either the institutional or state level to assess the employment experiences of students who had earned associate degrees in community college vocational programs. All of the studies selected for review attained response rates of

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50 percent or more. Among other factors, study findings were analyzed in relation to (1) graduate employment rates, (2) the relationship of the graduates' employment to their programs of study at college, and (3) the graduates' opinions concerning the contribution of community college vocational training to their career lives. Despite varying methodologies utilized in the studies, several common findings emerged:

- oo Most survey respondents (70 to 80 percent) reported that they were employed full-time; of those who were not employed or who were employed only part-time, the majority were either homemakers, military service personnel, or students.

- oo 66 percent to 96 percent of the employed respondents reported that their jobs were in some way related to their programs of study at college. But this relationship between employment and program of study varied greatly by occupational area. Those graduating from allied health and secretarial programs were most likely to find related employment, while those in management, business, and natural science programs were less likely to find jobs that make use of their skills.

- oo The graduates, when asked, gave relatively high marks to the colleges for providing "technical knowledge" or "job skills" that are requisite to finding employment, but they expressed considerably less satisfaction with the colleges' helpfulness in providing "knowledge about career opportunities" or in preparing them for career advances.

Available data on vocational program graduates, in short, present a mixed picture. Most graduates apparently find employment, although some program graduates are more successful than others in securing jobs for which they were trained. Respondents also indicate satisfaction with the job skills they acquire at college, but they consistently express dissatisfaction with the college role in paving the way for career advances beyond the first job.

Can the graduates' career outcomes, however, be attributed to their vocational studies? Survey limitations, discussed below, make it almost impossible to answer this question.

Study Limitations

Methodological weaknesses severely limit the validity of the survey data as measures of program effect on the graduates' career lives. Most of the follow-up studies, for example, were conducted on a one-shot basis anywhere from six weeks to three years after graduation, thus providing only a limited pictureofthegraduates' career lives. Thatrespondents' expressed dissatisfaction with the college role in promoting career advancement may be an artifact of this one-shot design; because the surveys are conducted at one time shortly after graduation, many respondents probably have not had a chance to settle into their jobs and discover the paths to advancement in the internal labor markets of their firms.

Other methodological problems in many (though not all of the follow-up studies) include the following:

- oo low response rates with only limited control for respondent bias;
- oo failure to control for the graduates' prior employment experience; and
- oo lack of control groups against which the graduates' employment experiences can be assessed.

These limitations leave open the possibility that the graduates' employment success may be a function of prior job experience rather than a direct outcome of program completion. They also make it very difficult to determine if community college occupational graduates have an advantage in the labor market over nongraduates or those with no formal occupational training at all.

Another limiting factor is the tendency to ignore nonvocational student goals. Many students graduating from vocational curricula undoubtedly intend to transfer. Others may have enrolled for personal or avocational reasons that have nothing to do with employment or career advancement. Some of these graduates may be unemployed or in jobs having no relationship to their college program of study. This should not, however, be interpreted as a mark of program failure.

Conclusion: Needed Improvements in Vocational Follow-Up Efforts

The methodological weaknesses outlined by Palmer (1985) are similar to those identified by Williams and Snyder in a 1974 review of vocational follow-up studies, thus indicating that while vocational program enrollments have grown over the past decade, our knowledge about the career success of program graduates has not. In order to improve vocational follow-up studies, several steps, suggested by Williams and Snyder (1974), can be taken:

- oo Increase response rates by reducing the size of survey instruments. This can be accomplished, in part, by eliminating questionnaire items requesting information that is normally gathered at registration.
- oo Solicit information on the graduates educational goals and prior employment experiences.
- oo Gather longitudinal data to "trace the career development of former students and obtain time-tested perceptions of their college experiences" (p. 42).
- oo Base follow-up studies on "well-chosen samples of the study population" as an alternative to surveying (usually futilely) all program graduates.

These and other steps, such as including a control group of nongraduates or non-college attendees in the study, will require institutions and state agencies to devote more resources to research than has been the case in the past. Improved follow-up efforts will also require a fundamental change in the way student data are gathered, for most data currently collected on college students are generated through state or institutional information systems that are designed for enrollment and accounting purposes rather than for studies of persistence, performance, and student outcomes. The collection of accurate data on vocational outcomes represents a considerable challenge to community college researchers, both in terms of resources and underlying research philosophy.

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